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at



CHAPTER L.

The telegraph messenger looked again at the address on the envelope in his hand, and then scanned the house before which he was standing. It was an old-fashioned building of brick, two stories high, with an attic above; and stories high, with an attic above; and it stood in an old-fashioned part of lower New York, not far from the East river. Over the wide archway there was a small and weather-worn sign. "Ramspo Steel and Iron works," and over the smaller door alongside was a still smaller sign, "Whittier, Wheatcreft & Co."

When the messenger boy had made out the name he opened this smaller door and entered the long, narrow store. Its sides and walls were covered with bins and racks containing sample steel ralls and iron



THE TELEGRAPH MESSENGER LOOKED AGAIN AT THE ADDRESS,

beams and coils of wire of various sizes. Down at the end of the store were desks where several clerks and bookkeepers were at work.

As the messenger drew near a redheaded office boy blocked the passage, saying, somewhat aggressively, "Well?" "Got a telegram for Whittier, Wheatcroft & Co.," the messenger explained, pugnaciously thrusting himself forward. "In there!" the office boy returned, jerking his thumb over his shoulder.

jerking his thumb over his shoulder toward the extreme end of the build-ing, an extension, roofed with glass and separated by a glass screen from the space where the clerks were at work.

separated by a glass screen from the space where the clerks were at work. The messenger pushed open the glazed door of this private office, a bell jingled over his head, and the three occupants of the room looked up.

"Whittier, Wheatcroft & Co.?" said the messenger, interrogatively, holding out the yellow envelope.

"Yes," responded Mr. Whittier, a tall, handsome old gentleman, taking the telegram. "You sign, Paul."

The youngest of the three, looking-like his father, took the messenger's book and glancing at an old-fashioned clock which stood in the corner, he wrote the name of the firm and the hour of delivery. He was watching the messenger go out when his attention was suddenly called to subjects of more importance by a sharp exclamation from his father.

"Well, well, well," said the elder Whittier, with his eyes fixed on the telegram he had just read. "This is very strange—very strange, indeed!"

"What's strange?" asked the third occupant of the office, Mr. Wheatcroft, a short, stout, irascible-looking man, with a shock of grizzling hair.

For an answer Mr. Whittier handed to Mr. Whoatcroft the thin slip of paper.

No sooner had the junior partner read

paper.
No sooner had the junior partner read

the paper than he seemed angrier than Strange?" he cried. "I should think

"Strange?" he cried. "I should think it was strange! Confoundedly strange—and deuced unpleasant, too." "May I see what it is that's so very strange?" asked t'aul, picking up the

dispatch.
"Of course you can see it," growled Mr. Wheatcroft, "and let us see what you can make of it."

you can make of it."

The young man read the message aloud: "Deal off. Can get quarier cent better terms. Carkendale."

Then he read it again to himself. At last he said: "Iconfess I don't see anything so very mysterious in that, we've leat a contract. I suppose—but that.

thing so very mysterious in that, we've lost a contract, I suppose—but that must have happened lots of times before, hasn't it?"
"It's happened twice before this fail," returned Mr. Wheateroft flercely, "after our bid had been practically accepted, and just before the signing of the final contract!"

"Let me explain. Wheatcroft," inter-rupted the elder Whittler gently. "You must not expect my son to understand the ine and outs of this business as wo

the ins and cuts of this business as so do. Hesides he has been in the office only ton days."
"I don't expect him to understand," growled Wheateroft, "How could he? I don't understand it myself!"
"Close that door, Paul," said Mr. Whittier, "I don't want any of the clerks to know what we are talking about."
"Here are the facts in the case, Paul.

regrowled Wheateroft. "How could be?
Idon't understand it myself!"

"Close that door, Paul," said Mr.
Whittier. "I don't want any of the clerks to know what we are taking about."

"Here are the facis in the case, Paul, and I think you will admit that they are certainly carious," began Mr. Whittier.

"Twice this fall, and now a third tine, we have been the lowest bidders for important orders, and yet, just before our bid wasformally accounted, somebody has cut us under by a fraction of a cent and got the job. First we thought we were going toget the building of the Barataria Contract, bridge over the lattle Mackintosh river; but it a the end it was the Tuxede Steel Company that got the first thousand miles of wire for the transcontinental telegraph—we made an extraordinarily low estimate on that. We wanted the contract, and we threw off not only our profit, but even allowances for office expenses—and yet fire minutes before the last bid had to be in the Tuxede company put in an older only a hundred sand twenty-five dollars less than ours. Now comes the legram to-day. The Methuselsh Life Insurance Company is going to put up a big building; we were asked there is little doing, as you know, and the clerk and the work—Ilmos are nard and there is little doing, as you know, and

we must get work for our men if we can. We meant to have this contract if we could. We offered to do it at what was really actual cost of manufacture—without profit, first of all, and then without any charge at all for office expenses, for interest on capital, for depreciation of plant, the vice president of the Methuselah, the one who attends to all their real estate, is Mr. Carkendale. He told me yesterday that our bid was very low, and that we were certain to get the contract. And now he sends me this," and Mr. Whittier picked up the telegram again.

"Do you mean to say that you think the Tuxedo people have somehow been made acquainted with our bids?" asked the young mao.

made acquaman.

"That's what I'm thinking now." was

"That's what I'm answer. "I can't

Wheateroft's sharp answer. "I can't think anything else. For two months we haven't been successful in gesting a we haven't been successful in gesting a single one of the big contracts. We've had our share of the little things, of course, but they don't amount to much. The big things that we really wanted have slipped through our fingers. We've lost them by the skin of our teeth every time. That isn't accident, is it? Of course not! Then there's only one explanation-there's a leak in this

planation—there's a leak in this office somewhere."
"You don't suspect any of the clerks, do you, Mr. Wheatcroft?" asked the clider Whittier, sadly.
"I don't suspect anybody in particular," returned the junior partner, brushing his hair up the wrong way. "And I suspect everybody in general. I haven't an idea who it is, but it's somebody!"
"Who makes up the bids on these

somebody!"

"Who makes up the bids on these important contracts?" asked Paul.

"Wheatcroft and I," answered his father. "The specifications are forwarded to the works, and the engineers make their estimates of the actual cost of labor and material. These estimates are sent to us here, and we add whatever we think best for interest and the standard of the actual cost of th

for expenses, and for wear and tear and for profit."
"Who writes the letters making the offer—the one with the actual figures, I mean?" the son continued.
"I do," the elder Whittier explained.

"I do," the elder Whittier explained.
"I have slways done it."
"You don't dictate them to a type-writer?" Paul pursued.
"Certainly not," the father responded.
"I write them with my own hand—and wha!'s more, I take the press copy myself, and there is a special letter-book for such things. This letter-book is kept always in the safe in this office—in fact. I can say that this particular letterfact, I can say that this particular letter-

book never leaves my hands except to go into that safe. And, as you know, nobody has access to that-safe except Wheateroft and me."
"And the major," corrected the junior

partner.
"No," Mr. Whittier explained, "Van

"No," Mr. Whittier explained, "Van Zandt has no need to go there now."
"But he used to," Mr. Wheatcroft pursisted.
"He did once," the senior partner returned, "but when we bought those new safes outside there in the main office there was no longer any need for the chief bookkeeper to go to this smaller safe; and so hast month—it was while you were away, Wheatcroft—Van Zandt came in here one afternoon and said that as he never had occasion to go to this safe, he would rather not have the responsibility of knowing the combinaresponsibility of knowing the combinan. I told him we had perfect confi-

dence in him —"
"I should think so!" broke in the explosive Wheateroft. "The major has been with us thirty years now. I'd suspect myself of petty larceny as soon as

him."
"As I said," continued the elder Whittier, "I told him that we trusted him perfectly, of course. But he urged me, and to please him I changed the combination of this safe that afternoon. You will remember, Wheateroft, that I gave you the new word the day you came back."

came back."
"Yes, I remember," said Mr. Wheatcroft. "But I don't see why the major
did not want to know how to open that
safe. Perhaps he is beginning to feel
his years now. He must be sixty, the
major; and I've been thinking for some
time the looked ware.

time de looked worn."

Five minutes later Mr. Whittier, Mr.

Wheateroft and the only son of the sen-ior partner left the glass-framed private office, and, walking leisurely through the long store, passed into the street. They did not notice that the old bookkeener, Major Van Zandt, whose high desk was so placed that he could overlook the private office, had been watching them ever since the messen-ger had delivered the dispatch.

CHAPFER II.

After luncheon, as it happened, both the senior and the junior partner of Whittier, Wheatcroft & Co. had to attend meetings, and they went their several ways, leaving Paul to return to the office alone. When he came opposite to the house which bore the weather-beaten sign of the firm, he stood still for a moment and looked across with mingled pride and affection. The building was old-inshioned, so old-fashioned, indeed, that only a long-established firm could afford to occupy it. It was Paul Whittier's great grand-father who had founded the Ramapo Works; there had been cast the cannon for many of the ships of the little American navy that gave such a good account of itself in the war of 1812. Again, in 1848, had the house of Whittier, w heatcroft's father having been taken the present Mr.

he had made himselt master of the theory and practice of metallurgy. It was only for a moment that he stood on the sidewalk opposite, looking at the old building. Then he threw away his cigarette and went over. Instead of entering the longstore, he walked down the alley-ways left open for the heavy wagons. When he came opposite the private office in the rear of the store he examined the doors and the windows carefully to see if he could detect any means of ingress other than those open to everybody.

to everybody.

As Paul entered the private office he found the porter there putting coal on

Stepping back to close the glass door behind him, that they might be alone, "Mike, who shuts up the office at night?"

"Sure I do, Mister Paul," was the promptanewer.

"And do you open it in the morning?" the young man asked.
"I do that," Mike responded.

"Do you see that these windows are always fastened on the inside?" was the next query.
"Yes, Mister Paul," the porter re-

well," and the inquirer hesitated briefly before putting the question, "have you found any of these windows unfastened any morning lately when

you came here?"
"And how did you know that?" Mike

"And how did you know that?" Mike returned in surprise.
"What morning was it?" asked Paul, pushing his advantage.
"It was last Monday mornin', Mister Paul," the porter explained, "an' how it was I dunno, for I had every wan o' the windows tight Saturday night—an' Monday mornin' wan o' them was unfastened whin I wint to open it to lot a bit o' air into the office here."
"You sleep here always, don't you?" Paul proceeded.

"You sleep here always, don't you?"
Paul proceeded.
"I've slep' here iviry night for three
year now come hanksgivin'." Mike replied. "I've the whole top o' the house
to myself. It's an iligant apartment I
have there, Mister Paul."
"The paul of the post of the paul."

When Mike had left the office Paul took a chair before the fire and lighted a cigar. For half an hour he sat sliently

thinking.
He came to the conclusion that Mr. He came to the conclusion that Mr. Wheateroft was right in his suspicion. Whittier, Wheateroft & Co. had lost important contracts because of underbidding due to knowledge surreptitiously obtained. He believed that some one had got into the store on Sunday while Mike was taking a walk, and that this somebody had somehow opened the safe. There was never any money in that private safe; it was intended to contain only important parends. tended to contain only important pa-pers. It did contain the letter-book of the firm's bids, and this is what war



"MIKE, WHO SHUTS UP THE OFFICE AT NIGHT?"

wanted by the man who had got into the office and who had let himself out by the window, leaving it unfastened behind him. What grieved him when he had come

What grieved him when he had come to this conclusion was that the thieffor such the housebreaker was in reality
—was probably one of the men in the
employ of the firm. It seemed to him
aimost certain that the man who had
broken in knew all the ins and outs of
the office. And how could this knowledge have been obtained except by an
employe? Paul was well acquainted
with the clerks in the outer office.
There were five of them, including the
old bookkeeper; and although none of
them had been with the firm as long as
the major, no one of them had been
there less than ton years.
While Paul was stiting quietly in the
private office, smoking a cigar, with all

private office, smoking a cigar, with all his mental faculties at their highest

his mental faculties at their highest tension, the clock in the corner audden-ity struck three.

Paul swiftly swung around in his chair and looked at it. An old eight-day clock it was, which not only told the time of day, but pretended also to sup-ply miscellaneous astronomical informa-

ply miscelianeous astronomical information. It stood by itself in the corner,
For a moment after it struck Paul
stared at it with a fixed gaze, as though
he did not see what he was looking at.
Then a light came into his eyes and a
smile flitted across his hips.
He turned around in his chair slowly
and measured with his eye the proportions of the room, the distance between
the desks and the safe and the clock.
He glanced up at the sloping glass roof
above him. Then he smiled again, and
again sat silent for a minute. He rose
to his feet and stood with his back to
the fire. Almost in front of him was

to his feet and stood with his back to the fire. Almost in front of him was the clock in the corner.

He took out his watch and compared its time with that of the clock. Apparently he found that the clock was too fast, for he walked over to it and turned the minute hand back. It seemed as though this was a more difficult feat than he supposed or that he went about it carelessly, for the minute hand broke off short in his integers. A spasmodic movement of his as the thin metal snapped pulled the chain off its eviluder, and the weight fell with a cylinder, and the weight fell with a

cylinder, and the class, and the red-headed office boy was prompt in answer to the bell Paul rang a moment after.
"Bobby," said the young man to the

boy as he took his hat and overcost,
"I've just broken the clock. I know a
shop where they make a specialty of repairing timepieces like that. going to tell them to send for it at once.
Give it to the man who will come this afternoon with my card. Do you understand?"

"Cert." the boy answered. "If he sin't got your card, he don't get the clock."

clock."
"That's what I mean," Paul responded, as he left the office.

Hefore he reached the street door he met Mr. Wheatcroft.
"Paul," cried the junior partner explaively, "I've been thinking about that—about that—won know what I mean! And I've decided that we had better put a detective on this thing at once!"

once!"
"Yes," said Paul, "that's a good idea.

"Yes," said Paul, "that's a good idea. In fact, I had just come to the same conclusion. I—" Then he checked himself. He had turned slightly to speak to Mr. Wheatcroft, and now he saw that Major Van Zandt was standing within ten fact of them, and he united that the old bookkeeper's face was strangely pale.

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